

RELATIONSHIPS THAT HURT



Understanding difficult relationship dynamics — and how to find your way to something healthier.

—
For anyone who has felt confused, diminished, or in pain in a relationship — and wants to understand why.



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada),

20+ years in private practice

A note from me to you

If you have picked up this workbook, there is a good chance a relationship has been hurting you.

Perhaps it is one where the pain is obvious. Or perhaps it is more confusing than that, a relationship with good moments and very bad ones, one that produces a particular kind of exhaustion that is hard to explain to anyone outside it.

Perhaps you are asking yourself whether to stay or go.

Or perhaps you are asking a quieter, more painful question.

Why do I keep ending up here?

Of all the things that bring us to therapy, relationships are among the most common.

Not always relationships that are obviously terrible, not always with a clear villain and a clear victim. More often, relationships that are confusing. That have good moments and very bad ones. That produce an exhaustion unlike any other, because they are bound up with love, hope, history, and the frightening question of what it would mean to leave.

And I say that not only as a psychologist, but as someone whose own life has been shaped by these questions.

I grew up loved.

That part matters.

But love and stability are not always the same thing.

My father lived with bipolar disorder and struggled with alcoholism. My mother worked full-time, was emotionally unavailable at times, and had a temper of her own. I was an only child living in an environment that often felt unpredictable and emotionally unstable.

But there was also pain.

And without anyone consciously teaching me, I absorbed certain beliefs about relationships.

I learned that love and pain belonged together. That closeness came with anxiety. That walking on eggshells was normal. That unpredictability was something to adapt to rather than question.

Of course, I did not know I was learning these things. We don't stand back and analyse the emotional atmosphere we grow up in as children. We simply adapt.

And what we adapt to often becomes what feels familiar.

For many years, I carried those definitions of love into my relationships with others, and into my relationship with myself.

I found myself repeating patterns I didn't understand. Sometimes I was the one being hurt. Sometimes I was the one contributing to the difficulties. Sometimes both.

Different people. Different circumstances. But eventually I had to confront an uncomfortable truth.

I was the common denominator.

Not because I was broken. Not because everything was my fault. But because wherever I went, I brought with me the beliefs, fears, wounds, and protective strategies that had helped me survive earlier experiences.

Even when relationships involved pain, the pain was familiar. And familiar can feel strangely safe.

For much of my life, I believed that if I could just find the right relationship, the pain inside me would finally settle.

What I came to understand, slowly and often painfully, was that life wasn't withholding the right person from me. Life was trying to wake me up.

Again and again, relationships brought me face to face with the same fears, the same wounds, and the same beliefs I had unconsciously carried since childhood.

I used to think these experiences meant something had gone wrong. Now I see them differently. Not as punishments, but as invitations.

Invitations to become curious about myself. Invitations to understand the ways I had learned to survive. Invitations to recognise that the pain I carried deserved compassion rather than criticism.

One of the greatest lessons of my own healing has been this.

We often spend years believing we are searching for the right relationship, only to discover that life has been gently and persistently asking us to develop a different relationship with ourselves.

For a long time, I thought another person would heal what hurt inside me. But relationships can support healing. They cannot do the healing for us.

That work belongs to each of us. Not because we caused our wounds. Not because we are to blame. But because we are the ones who live with them.

My wounds needed to be taken seriously, not denied, not judged, not pushed away, but met with compassion. Healing required me to turn towards the parts of myself I had spent years avoiding.

And perhaps that is one of life's greatest invitations. To learn to become the loving, compassionate presence for ourselves that we may have spent a lifetime searching for in others.

Many of us assume trauma refers only to severe abuse, violence, or neglect. Those experiences can certainly be deeply traumatic. But trauma can also come from experiences that are far less obvious. As Gabor Maté has written, trauma is not simply what happens to us. It is what happens inside us as a result of what happens to us.

Sometimes trauma develops because of what happened. Sometimes it develops because of what was missing. Not feeling seen, not feeling emotionally understood, learning that your needs were inconvenient, growing up around conflict that felt unpredictable, feeling responsible for the emotions of the adults around you, learning to suppress parts of yourself in order to stay connected.

These experiences may not look dramatic from the outside. And yet they can profoundly shape the way we relate to ourselves and to others.

This exploration is not about blame. Many of our parents were carrying wounds of their own, patterns that had been passed to them, transmitted across generations without anyone consciously choosing them. Understanding this doesn't excuse harmful behaviour, and it doesn't remove accountability. It simply allows us to approach our own history with curiosity rather than judgement.

Healing rarely begins with blame. It begins with understanding.

This workbook covers romantic relationships, family relationships, friendships, and working relationships, because the underlying patterns are often remarkably similar. The people change. The context changes. But the emotional themes frequently remain the same.

Some of what this workbook describes sits at the more serious end of the spectrum, dynamics that are not merely difficult but genuinely harmful. If you are in a relationship where you feel unsafe or afraid, professional support is essential. Understanding the pattern is valuable, but understanding is not a substitute for safety.

For everyone else carrying the confusion, grief, frustration, or longing that painful relationships create, this workbook is here to offer some clarity. Because clarity is often where healing begins.

And healing, I have discovered both personally and professionally, is less about becoming someone new and more about learning to relate differently to the person you have always been.

With warmth,

*Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. You can print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a framework for journalling. Work through the sections in order if you can, they build on each other, but follow your own instincts if something draws you elsewhere.

A note before you begin. Some of what comes up here may be tender. If you notice something difficult surfacing, please be gentle with yourself, and don't push through alone. The final section maps the support available to you.

Contents

- 01 Why we end up in relationships that hurt
- 02 The relationship patterns we repeat
- 03 When love hurts, difficult versus harmful
- 04 Why we stay
- 05 What healthy love actually looks like
- 06 Moving towards something different
- 07 Finding the right level of support

SECTION 1

Why we end up in relationships that hurt

Trauma, attachment, and our unconscious definition of love

It is a question so many of us have carried, in one form or another, even if we have never said it aloud.

Why do I keep ending up here? Why do I keep choosing people who treat me this way? Why does this feel so familiar?

And beneath all of those is usually a quieter, more painful one. What is wrong with me?

The answer is often much simpler than we expect. Nothing is wrong with you. What is happening makes sense, once we understand how human beings learn about relationships.

To see why we repeat certain patterns, we have to look backwards. Not because the past is an excuse, and not because it determines the future, but because the past is where our relational template was formed. And until we understand the template, it is very hard to change it.

Adaptation, and the beliefs we carry

One of the most important things to understand is that we are remarkably adaptive as children. When we grow up in an environment that feels emotionally unsafe, inconsistent, critical, or overwhelming, we cannot simply leave. We have to adapt.

And the adaptations that help us survive childhood often become the patterns that create difficulty in adulthood.

If we experienced criticism as children, we may become highly self-critical. If we felt emotionally neglected, we may become intensely sensitive to rejection. If we cared for everyone else, we may grow up unable to recognise our own needs. If we learned that love must be earned, we may spend adulthood working tirelessly for approval.

These adaptations are not signs of weakness. They are signs of survival. And over time, they become beliefs.

I am too much. I am not enough. My needs are a burden. Love must be earned. People leave. I have to take care of everyone else. I cannot rely on anyone but myself.

Most of us are not consciously aware that we hold these beliefs. And yet these beliefs quietly shape almost every relationship decision we make.

The unconscious definition of love

As children, we learn what love is long before we can define it. We learn it by watching. How our parents related to each other. How they related to themselves. How they related to us.

We learned what happened when someone was upset. Whether emotions were welcomed or avoided. Whether conflict led to repair, or to distance. Whether love felt safe, or conditional, or unpredictable.

Over time, those experiences formed an unconscious definition of love. And here is the difficulty. Our nervous system does not necessarily seek what is healthy. It seeks what is familiar.

If criticism was part of love, criticism can feel familiar. If inconsistency was part of love, inconsistency can feel familiar. If you had to work hard for affection, relationships that require hard work may feel strangely compelling.

This does not mean we consciously want pain. It means our nervous system recognises the pattern. And recognition often gets mistaken for chemistry.

Attachment and relational templates

Attachment theory helps us understand how these early experiences become internal templates, or blueprints, for how we expect relationships to work.

If we grew up securely attached, we usually had caregivers who were consistently available, responsive, and emotionally present. Through those experiences, we came to learn.

I am worthy of love. Others can be trusted. Relationships can survive difficulty.

If we grew up anxiously attached, connection often felt inconsistent or unpredictable. Love and emotional availability may have been present at times and absent at others. Over time, we learned.

Connection feels uncertain. I have to work hard to keep people close. Abandonment is always possible.

If we grew up avoidantly attached, our emotional needs were often overlooked, discouraged, or met with emotional distance. To adapt, we learned.

My needs are too much. I cannot rely on others. It is safer not to need anyone.

These patterns can continue to influence who we are drawn to, how we respond when relationships feel difficult, and what we come to expect from love and connection.

But these patterns are not life sentences. They are adaptations, ways of coping that made sense in the environments in which they were formed. We cannot erase what we have learned, but we can build something new alongside it. What we practise repeatedly grows stronger, and what we stop feeding gradually weakens, until something different has room to take its place.

When healthy love feels uncomfortable

One of the most surprising parts of healing is that healthy relationships do not always feel immediately comfortable.

Sometimes we finally meet someone who is emotionally available, accepting, kind, and consistent, and instead of feeling relieved, there is a certain uneasiness that we experience that we can't quite identify. Sometimes it feels great. Other times it doesn't. We really want it to, but it's like something is pulling us in another direction. We try to make ourselves believe everything is okay, but it doesn't fit somehow.

It is worth pausing here, because this is easy to confuse with something else entirely. The uneasiness of unfamiliarity is not the same as the discomfort of something being wrong. One is your nervous system adjusting to a kind of safety it doesn't yet recognise. The other is your judgement trying to tell you

something important. If you find yourself returning again and again to a specific incident, a specific fear, or a specific way this person treats you, that is not unfamiliarity. Please don't stay somewhere simply because it feels uncomfortable and tell yourself it must be healthy. The Repair Test in Section 3 can help you tell the difference.

What we often discover, once we are sure it is the first kind of uneasiness, is that we had unknowingly confused intensity with intimacy. Longing with love. Earning connection with receiving it.

Healthy relationships often feel calmer than we expect. Not because they are less loving, but because they require less survival.

A personal reflection

For many years I believed the problem was the people I was choosing. After several painful relationships, I found myself asking the question so many of us ask. Why does this keep happening?

The faces were different. The circumstances were different. And yet the emotional themes remained remarkably similar. Eventually the penny dropped.

The common denominator was not simply the people I was choosing. It was the unconscious template I was bringing into relationships. That realisation was uncomfortable. But it was also freeing.

Because the pattern had been built through repetition, and what gets built through repetition can be rebuilt. Not by erasing the old wiring, but by practising something new often enough that it becomes the stronger pathway.

There is a word worth having in hand as we go. Self-compassion, meeting yourself with the same warmth you would offer someone you love, rather than the criticism that got you this far. We will come back to it properly. For now, it is enough to know it has a name, and that you are allowed to reach for it at any point in what follows.

Exercise 1 What you learned about love

Looking back with curiosity

These questions are an invitation to look gently at where your template was formed. There is no need to answer all of them, stay with the ones that draw you.

What did love look like in the family you grew up in?

How was conflict handled? What happened when someone was upset?

What did you learn about expressing needs, or asking for help?

What messages did you receive about your worth?

What do you believe you need to do in order to be loved?

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Exercise 2 What endings taught me

Looking beyond what happened

The details of what happened often matter less than what you were left feeling, and what that feeling quietly convinced you was true. A feeling like loneliness can leave behind a belief like I will always end up left. A feeling like never being enough can leave behind a belief like I have to earn my place. This can include romantic relationships, friendships, or any connection that mattered to you.

When a relationship or friendship has ended, what feeling did it leave behind?

What did that feeling convince you was true, about love, or about your own worth?

How did my parents treat each other? What did that teach me about what to expect from love?

How did they treat themselves? What did that teach me about how love treats the self?

How did they treat me? What did that become my own definition of being loved?

A gentle reminder

These questions can bring up grief you did not know was still there. That is not a sign you are doing this wrong, it is often a sign you are finally looking at something honestly.

Exercise 3 The pattern that keeps returning

A deeper question

What patterns keep repeating across your relationships?

What does your current relationship, or your most recent one, provide that feels difficult to imagine living without?

And when in your life did you first long for that feeling?

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

SECTION 2

The relationship patterns we repeat

What we recreate without realising

Once we understand that our early experiences create an unconscious definition of love, a different question begins to emerge. Instead of asking why do I keep choosing the wrong people, we begin asking what pattern keeps repeating.

Because most of us don't actually repeat relationships. We repeat emotional experiences.

The faces change. The circumstances change. The ages, jobs, personalities, and life stages change. And yet the emotional experience remains surprisingly familiar. The same feelings. The same fears. The same longing. The same disappointments.

This is often the clue that we are not simply reacting to the person in front of us, we are reacting to an old template that has been quietly shaping our choices for years.

I call these the Four Roles. Not because everyone fits neatly into one, most of us move between them, but because almost everyone recognises themselves in at least one before they ever see it written down.

The Rescuer

We may become the helper, the fixer, the caretaker, feeling most comfortable supporting someone else's growth, managing someone else's emotions, carrying responsibilities that do not belong to us. At first this feels loving. But over time the relationship becomes unbalanced, and our own needs disappear beneath everyone else's.

If I don't take care of this, who will?

The Pursuer

Some spend relationships chasing connection, seeking reassurance, monitoring emotional distance, trying to repair every rupture immediately, trying to prevent abandonment before it happens. Underneath this pattern is often a profound fear of disconnection.

If I don't reach out first, they'll disappear.

The Distancer

We may long for intimacy, but become uncomfortable when it arrives. This can lead to withdrawing when relationships become close, feeling overwhelmed by expectations, and valuing independence above connection. This pattern often develops when vulnerability felt unsafe earlier in life.

If I let them get too close, I'll lose myself.

The Critic and the Pleaser

These two patterns often exist together. One person seeks control through criticism. The other seeks safety through accommodation. Over time, both become trapped. One never feels satisfied. The other never feels enough. Unlike the patterns above, this one describes a dynamic between two people rather than a single role, though most of us recognise ourselves more on one side of it than the other.

The Critic. If I don't point out the problem, nothing will ever change.

The Pleaser. If I just do enough, they won't be upset with me.

Does this feel familiar?

Perhaps you text first, apologise first, and read silence as evidence that something is wrong, reaching for reassurance the moment it feels like it might slip away. Or perhaps it is the opposite. Someone reaches for you, and your instinct is to pull back, even when part of you wants to stay close. The more one of you reaches, the more the other retreats. The more the other retreats, the harder the reaching becomes. Neither side is the problem. The pattern is.

Whichever role feels most like yours, try to meet it without flinching away. It was never a flaw. It was a strategy that worked, once, to keep you safe, or connected, or loved in whatever way was available. This is the same gentleness Section 1 named. It belongs here too.

Quick check Which role is active for you right now?

Mark any statement that feels true for you today, then notice which group has the most marks.

Rescuer

I feel responsible for how the other person feels.

I find it easier to listen to their problems than to name my own.

Pursuer

I replay conversations, looking for signs something is wrong.

I reach out again if I don't hear back quickly.

Distancer

I feel crowded when someone wants more closeness.

I pull back rather than say what I'm feeling.

Critic / Pleaser

I point out what's wrong before I notice what's working.

I agree even when I don't, to keep the peace.

A gentle reminder

Most of us mark statements in more than one group, that is normal, not a contradiction. The group with the most marks is usually the pattern most active right now, not a permanent label.

Exercise 4 The pattern beneath the pattern

Rather than focusing on the people

Spend some time with what emotional experience has repeated throughout your relationships, rather than only on who you chose.

Which of the patterns above, Rescuer, Pursuer, Distancer, Critic, Pleaser, feels most familiar?

What role do you tend to play?

What familiar feeling keeps returning?

What has stayed the same, across very different relationships?

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

SECTION 3

When love hurts

Understanding the difference between difficult and harmful

One of the greatest sources of confusion in relationships is the difference between difficulty and harm.

All healthy relationships contain difficulty. No relationship exists without misunderstanding, conflict, disappointment, or periods of disconnection. Difficulty is part of being human.

Harm is something different.

A difficult relationship may involve conflict, but we both remain fundamentally committed to understanding each other. A harmful relationship consistently erodes one person's wellbeing, autonomy, self-worth, or sense of safety.

The distinction matters, because understanding what you are dealing with changes what is required.

I call this distinction the Repair Test, because it usually comes down to one question more than any other. When something goes wrong, can it be repaired?

Signs of a difficult relationship

Conflict can be discussed.

We both take responsibility.

Repair is possible.

Boundaries are respected.

Differences can exist without punishment.

We are both capable of reflection.

Signs of a harmful relationship

Our reality is routinely dismissed.

Fear is present.

Boundaries are ignored.

Criticism becomes chronic.

Control replaces collaboration.

Accountability is absent.

The relationship consistently diminishes your sense of self.

A note on safety

If several of the signs above feel true for you, especially fear, control, or the sense that your reality is routinely dismissed, please don't work through the rest of this section alone. Understanding the pattern matters, but it is not a substitute for safety. A domestic violence service, a crisis line, or a trusted professional can help you think through next steps, and you do not need to have decided what to do before you reach out.

The cost of abandoning yourself

Not all harmful relationships involve obvious abuse. Sometimes the greatest harm comes from repeatedly abandoning yourself. Ignoring your needs, silencing your feelings, accepting behaviour that violates your values, shrinking yourself to maintain connection.

Over time, the relationship may not only damage your relationship with the other person. It damages your relationship with yourself.

Does this feel familiar?

Perhaps there is a relationship in your life where an old disagreement resurfaces every so often, uncomfortable, but afterwards you can talk it through, and neither of you punishes the other for having raised it. That is difficult.

Or perhaps there is one where raising the same issue is met with silence, or withdrawal, or the sense that you have become the problem simply by naming it, where nothing is ever quite acknowledged, so nothing ever really gets repaired. That is harmful.

If you recognised yourself in either of these, especially the second, let whatever surfaced land without adding to it. Recognising harm is not the same as having caused it. The shame that shows up here belongs to what happened to you, not to who you are. Of everywhere in this book so far, this is where the gentleness Section 1 named matters most.

Exercise 5 More yourself, or less?

An honest look

These questions are worth sitting with slowly. They are not asking you to make a decision, only to see your experience more clearly.

Do I feel more like myself, or less like myself, in this relationship?

Am I free to disagree?

Do I feel emotionally safe?

What am I constantly tolerating?

If I treated myself the way this relationship treats me, how would I feel?

A gentle reminder

There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

SECTION 4

Why we stay

The psychology of staying in painful relationships

One of the most misunderstood parts of painful relationships is just how hard it can be to leave, even when there is a deep awareness that something is not right.

From the outside, it can look obvious. From the inside, it rarely is.

Attachment and trauma bonds

We don't just attach to people, we attach to what they bring to life for us. A partner may represent acceptance. Belonging. Security. Validation. Hope. The possibility that an old wound might finally be healed.

When those needs become attached to a specific person, leaving can feel like losing far more than the relationship itself.

The hope that keeps us there

Most painful relationships are not painful all of the time. There are moments of warmth. Moments of closeness. Moments that remind us why we stayed. These moments often become the evidence we use to sustain hope.

The difficulty is that potential and reality are not the same thing. The person someone could become is not always the person they are.

The fear beneath the fear

Sometimes it can feel as though the fear of leaving is simply too great. But often, what we are really afraid of is what leaving would force us to face. Loneliness. Grief. Unmet needs. Uncertainty. The loss of a familiar identity.

The relationship may be painful. But it may also be protecting us from something that feels equally hard.

If you are not sure whether what is keeping you here belongs to hope or to something more serious, it is worth returning to the Repair Test in Section 3. The distinction between difficult and harmful changes what kind of support is likely to help.

Does this feel familiar?

Perhaps most of the relationship is calm, even good, which is exactly what makes the difficult periods so disorienting. Something shifts, every so often. Coldness, criticism, withdrawal. And you find yourself working harder than you have ever worked at anything to bring the relationship back to what you know it can be. When it finally softens again, the relief is so enormous it feels like proof the relationship is worth everything it costs. What is easy to miss is that this cycle, the withdrawal, the striving, the relief, may be

familiar in a much older way, echoing a love that was available, then gone, then available again if you were good enough, quiet enough, easy enough. You may not be chasing the relationship in front of you. You may be chasing the relief of finally being enough.

Or perhaps it looks like the opposite. Perhaps the withdrawal is coming from you, and it is not really about the other person at all. Somewhere, you know that pulling away hurts them, and that going quiet when they reach for you only makes things worse. But closeness itself may be what is hardest to tolerate, not because you do not want it, but because wanting it, and needing someone, is what feels most dangerous. If needing someone once reliably ended in disappointment, it makes sense that distance came to feel like the safer thing to want.

Hope and fear can pull in opposite directions, but they often lead to the same room. Relating not quite to the person in front of you, but to something much older.

If you recognise any of this, let it land without judgement. Staying was not weakness, and it was not proof that some part of you didn't already know better. It was your nervous system protecting you from a loss it once genuinely could not survive. That does not mean you have to stay. It only means the choice to remain has always made a kind of sense. And when you are ready, the choice to leave will make just as much sense. This is the self-compassion Section 1 named, asked to do its hardest work yet.

Exercise 6 What am I receiving here?

A different question

Rather than asking why am I staying, you might try a gentler and more revealing one.

What am I receiving here that feels impossible to find elsewhere?

And then, when in my life did I first begin searching for that?

A gentle reminder

This question can bring up grief as easily as insight. If it does, that is not a detour from the work, it is the work. Let it take as long as it takes.

SECTION 5

What healthy love actually looks like

Not perfection. Not intensity. Not constant happiness.

For some of us, unhealthy relationships feel more familiar than healthy ones, especially when healthy relationships weren't part of what was seen or experienced growing up.

Healthy love feels safe

Not perfect. Not conflict-free. Not endlessly harmonious. Safe.

You can express a need. You can make a mistake. You can disagree. You can have difficult conversations without fearing punishment, abandonment, humiliation, or retaliation.

Healthy love includes repair

All relationships experience ruptures. Healthy ones repair them. We apologise, take responsibility, and stay curious about each other's experience. The goal is understanding, not winning.

Healthy love allows both of us to exist

In unhealthy relationships, one of us often disappears. Our needs, our voice, our preferences, our boundaries. Healthy relationships make room for both of us to exist separately. Not one of us adapting endlessly to accommodate the other.

Healthy love is consistent

Consistency is often underestimated, because it lacks drama. And yet it is one of the deepest expressions of love. Being able to rely on someone. Knowing where you stand. Not constantly wondering whether connection will disappear. This is what creates the safety that genuine intimacy requires.

Healthy love may feel unfamiliar

We touched on this in Section 1. If your early experiences taught you that love involved unpredictability, chasing, self-sacrifice, or criticism, then calm can register as absence rather than relief.

Many of us spend years searching for someone who feels like home, only to discover that what felt like home was actually familiarity. Healing often involves creating an entirely new definition of what home feels like.

What this might look like for you

Whichever side of a pattern feels most like yours, healthy tends to move in a particular direction. If reaching out first has been your way of managing anxiety, it might eventually look like noticing a cold or withdrawn moment without immediately mobilising to fix it, trusting that connection does not have to be

earned by managing someone else's retreat. If pulling back has been yours, it might look like staying present the moment someone reaches for you, rather than retreating, tolerating the discomfort of being needed without believing it will cost you yourself. Neither of these happens in a straight line, or all at once. But it is the direction healing moves in.

If healthy love has felt more unsettling than comforting, that does not mean something is wrong with you, or with what you have found. It means a nervous system still learning a new definition of safe is doing exactly what it is meant to do. Meet that adjustment with the same compassion Section 1 named, for as long as it takes for unfamiliar to become familiar.

Exercise 7 A new definition

Beginning to imagine it

If you did not witness healthy love closely, it can be hard to picture. These questions are a place to begin.

What qualities would exist in a genuinely healthy relationship?

Which of those qualities feel unfamiliar to you?

What behaviours do I tend to confuse with love?

What behaviours actually create safety?

What kind of relationship would allow me to become more fully myself, rather than less?

A gentle reminder

If picturing healthy love feels harder than picturing the pain, that is not a failure of imagination. It simply means you are building something you did not get to see modelled. That is slower work, and it is still entirely possible.

SECTION 6

Moving towards something different

Healing the relationship beneath all relationships

If you have worked through this workbook carefully, you may have discovered something surprising. The relationship itself is not the whole story.

The difficult partner. The unavailable friend. The critical parent. The controlling boss. These relationships matter, and the pain they create is real. But underneath the relationship with the other person is something even more important.

The relationship you have with yourself.

Because every relationship we enter is filtered through the beliefs we hold about who we are, what we deserve, what we are responsible for, and what we must do to receive love. For many of us, this is where the real work begins.

Awareness comes before change

One of the more difficult parts of healing is that awareness alone does not immediately change what we find ourselves doing. You may start to notice why certain people feel familiar or compelling. You may become aware of the roles you tend to step into. You may begin to sense the beliefs that sit just beneath the surface. And still, there can be a pull towards what feels known.

This is normal. Patterns that formed over many years tend to loosen slowly. Awareness is not the end of the work. It is often where it begins.

Each time you notice a familiar pattern without immediately acting on it, something is already shifting. Each time you meet yourself with curiosity instead of self-judgement, something is already moving in a new direction. Each time you are brave enough to make a different choice, even briefly, something is already changing.

Grieving the love you needed

There is a form of grief that often accompanies this healing. Not the grief of losing a relationship. The grief of recognising what was missing. The love you needed but did not receive. The protection that was absent. The emotional attunement that never came.

Many of us spend years unconsciously trying to find someone who will finally provide what was missing earlier in life. Part of healing involves acknowledging that loss, not because we are giving up hope, but because we can stop searching for our childhood in our adult relationships.

We can begin relating to the people in front of us for who they actually are, rather than for what we hope they will heal.

Learning to turn towards yourself

We may get repeatedly hurt in relationships having spent years focused on the needs and emotions of others. We can become experts in other people, and strangers to ourselves.

Healing often involves reversing that. Learning to ask.

What am I feeling? What do I need? What matters to me? What am I tolerating? What boundary wants to be spoken?

At first, these questions can feel unfamiliar, and it may even feel selfish to ask them. But caring for yourself is not selfish. It is the foundation on which healthy relationships are built.

Self-compassion, named

There is a word for what this section has been building towards, and it deserves to be used plainly. Self-compassion.

It is not a mood, and it is not indulgence. It is what it sounds like when the way you speak to yourself begins to resemble the way you would speak to someone you love.

The psychologist Kristin Neff, who has spent much of her career studying this, describes it as having three parts. The first is warmth in place of criticism, meeting a mistake or a wound the way you would meet a friend's, not with a lecture but with care. The second is remembering you are not the only one. Every pattern this book has named, the reaching, the withdrawing, the earning, the quiet abandoning of yourself to keep the peace, is a shape that has formed in every one of us who has loved and been hurt. You are not uniquely broken. You are being human, in a very old and common way. The third is being able to feel what hurts without drowning in it. Not pushing the pain away, and not being swallowed by it either. Just enough steadiness to hold it.

It is worth being precise about what this is not, because in a book about painful relationships, the misunderstandings matter. Self-compassion is not self-pity, which keeps you circling the wound rather than tending it. It is not an excuse for how someone else treated you, it asks nothing of anyone but you. It is not weakness, it takes more strength to stay with your own pain gently than to armour against it. And it is not the same as staying. You can meet yourself with complete compassion and still decide, clearly and calmly, that a relationship is not safe to remain in. Compassion for yourself and accountability for others were never in competition.

It can start smaller than you might expect. A hand placed over your own heart. One sentence, spoken the way you would speak to someone you loved: this is hard, and I am still here. Not fixing anything. Not analysing it. Just staying.

Something happens when this becomes practice rather than an idea, met often enough that it starts to feel less like effort and more like memory. Unconditional acceptance, once unfamiliar, becomes familiar. And once it is familiar, everything Section 1 described about the nervous system reaching for what it knows starts working in your favour instead of against you. Wanting what is good for you stops taking discipline. You simply feel it, the way you once felt the old beliefs, except now there is something new to compare them to. I am not enough begins to soften. I have to earn love begins to soften. Not because you argued

yourself out of them, but because your nervous system finally has somewhere else to rest. Wanting what feels better stops being a decision. It becomes instinct.

I know this works. Not because I read about it somewhere, but because I have lived it. It is not fast, and there will be days it does not feel like anything is changing. But stay with it longer than feels convincing, and something in you begins to trust it. It took work. It was worth every bit of it.

When healthy feels uncomfortable

We have covered why this happens. A nervous system that learned to associate love with intensity does not unlearn that overnight, even once it knows better.

What matters here is what you do with the discomfort when it shows up. Not manufacturing a crisis to make things feel more familiar. Not mistaking the quiet for boredom and walking away from something good. Just noticing the unfamiliarity, naming it for what it is, and staying a little longer than feels natural.

When the old beliefs begin to change

Perhaps the deepest healing happens when the beliefs we formed about ourselves early in life begin, slowly, to shift.

When “I am not enough” becomes “I am worthy of care and respect.” When “I have to earn love” becomes “I am deserving of love simply because I exist.” When “My needs do not matter” becomes “My needs are important too.” When “I am responsible for everyone” becomes “I can care about others without abandoning myself.”

These shifts rarely happen all at once. They happen gradually, through awareness, through practice, through self-compassion, through supportive relationships, and through repeatedly choosing yourself when old patterns invite you not to.

A closing thought

This workbook was never meant to tell you whether to stay in, or leave, a particular relationship. Only you can make that decision.

Its purpose was to help you understand the forces that shape your relationships, so that your choices become more conscious. Because when we understand our wounds, our beliefs, our patterns, and our needs, we gain something genuinely valuable. Choice. And choice is where freedom begins.

You are not responsible for the experiences that shaped you. But you do have the opportunity to become aware of them. To understand them. To respond to them differently. And over time, to create a new definition of love, one built not on fear, self-abandonment, or survival, but on safety, authenticity, mutual respect, and genuine connection.

That journey is rarely easy. But it is possible. And it is worth it.

Exercise 8 What you are taking with you

Drawing it together

As you reach the end of this workbook, you might gently gather what has emerged. Stay with the questions that feel most alive.

What has been my biggest insight while working through this?

What relationship patterns do I now recognise more clearly?

What beliefs about myself am I beginning to question?

What behaviours am I no longer willing to tolerate?

What parts of myself need more attention, care, and compassion?

If I fully believed I was worthy of love, respect, and care, what might I do differently from here?

A gentle reminder

You have been doing real work to get to these questions. Whatever you have written here, come back to it in a few months, insight that feels abstract now often becomes something you can act on later.

SECTION 7

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

What you can do on your own

The most valuable self-directed work here is honest reflection on the pattern, rather than on the specific relationship. The exercises in this workbook are designed to support exactly that, helping you see the template clearly enough to begin relating to it consciously, rather than simply being run by it.

Journalling about your relational experiences, particularly the internal experience, the feelings and bodily sensations and the stories you tell yourself, tends to produce genuine insight over time.

Learning about attachment and relational patterns gives you a framework that makes your own experience more legible. And investing in the relationships in your life that are already relatively healthy matters, both as support, and as ongoing lived experience of what good relating actually feels like.

When therapy can help

Therapy is where the real work of changing relational patterns tends to happen. These patterns were formed in relationship, are held in the body as much as the mind, and are most reliably changed through a new relational experience, one in which the template gets activated and can be worked with directly, in real time, with a skilled and attuned other person.

Internal Family Systems is particularly useful here, for understanding the parts of you activated in difficult relationships (the part that clings, the part that withdraws, the part that people-pleases, the part that expects criticism) and for building a different relationship with them.

For those of us who have experienced genuinely harmful relationships, coercive control, emotional abuse, or the patterning that comes from growing up in fear, trauma-informed work is essential. Compassionate Inquiry, somatic approaches, and EMDR are often necessary alongside, or instead of, purely talk-based methods.

Couples therapy can be genuinely valuable for relationships that are difficult but not harmful, where we are both willing to engage honestly with the pattern and with our own part in it. It is not appropriate as a first-line response to relationships involving coercive control or abuse.

When more support may be needed

Difficult relationships don't usually require psychiatric care directly. But the psychological impact of sustained relational harm can produce anxiety, depression, and trauma responses that may benefit from psychiatric assessment alongside therapy. If you are experiencing significant depression, anxiety, or symptoms of post-traumatic stress in the context of a difficult relationship, please raise it with a GP or therapist.

A simple way to think about it

If you are unsure which of the following applies to you, the Repair Test in Section 3 is worth revisiting. The difficult and harmful distinction is what these options are built on.

Begin with self-directed reflection if you have enough safety and stability to reflect, and the relationship is difficult but not harmful.

Consider therapy if patterns are recurring across relationships, if the relationship is significantly affecting your wellbeing or self-worth, if there is relational harm in your history that has not been processed, or if you want support in changing the template rather than just surviving the situation.

Seek psychiatric assessment if relational stress has produced significant depression, anxiety, or trauma symptoms that are impairing daily life.

Reach out to specialist support, a domestic violence service, a crisis line, or an emergency service, if your safety is at risk. You do not need to have decided what to do before you reach out. You simply need to tell someone what is happening.

Whatever your situation, this is something I believe completely, drawn from more than two decades of sitting with people in exactly these kinds of relationships. Patterns change. So many of us who have spent whole adult lives in relationships that hurt have found our way to something genuinely different, not by trying harder within the same template, but by understanding it clearly enough to begin to step outside it. That work is real. It takes time. It almost always benefits from support. And it is entirely possible.

This workbook is for personal use only. All content © Shelagh MacFarlane.

Not for redistribution or commercial use.

About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

WhatsApp +60 17-358 2563

Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

THE SERIES

More in this collection

This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human — each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

01 Anxiety

When worry has become the background hum of your life.

02 The Relationship with Yourself

The most important relationship you will ever have — the one with you.

03 Living with Depression

When the colour has drained out, and effort no longer seems to reach.

04 Grief That Doesn't Have a Name

For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

05 Navigating a Life Transition

For the in-between — when one chapter has ended and the next has not begun.

06 The Burnout Workbook

When you are exhausted in a way that sleep no longer fixes.

07 Relationships That Hurt

Understanding the patterns that draw us into painful relationships.

08 Stuckness

When you don't know what's wrong — only that something is.

09 The Addiction Workbook

When the thing that helps has become the thing that hurts.

10 When Someone Dies

A map for grief that has a name, but looks nothing like we expect.

11 The Wounded Child

How what happened in childhood is still shaping your life today.

12 The Anger Workbook

For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too.

Explore the full collection at shelagh-psychologist.com

*The patterns that draw us into painful relationships
are not character flaws.
They are things we learned — and what was learned
can be unlearned.*



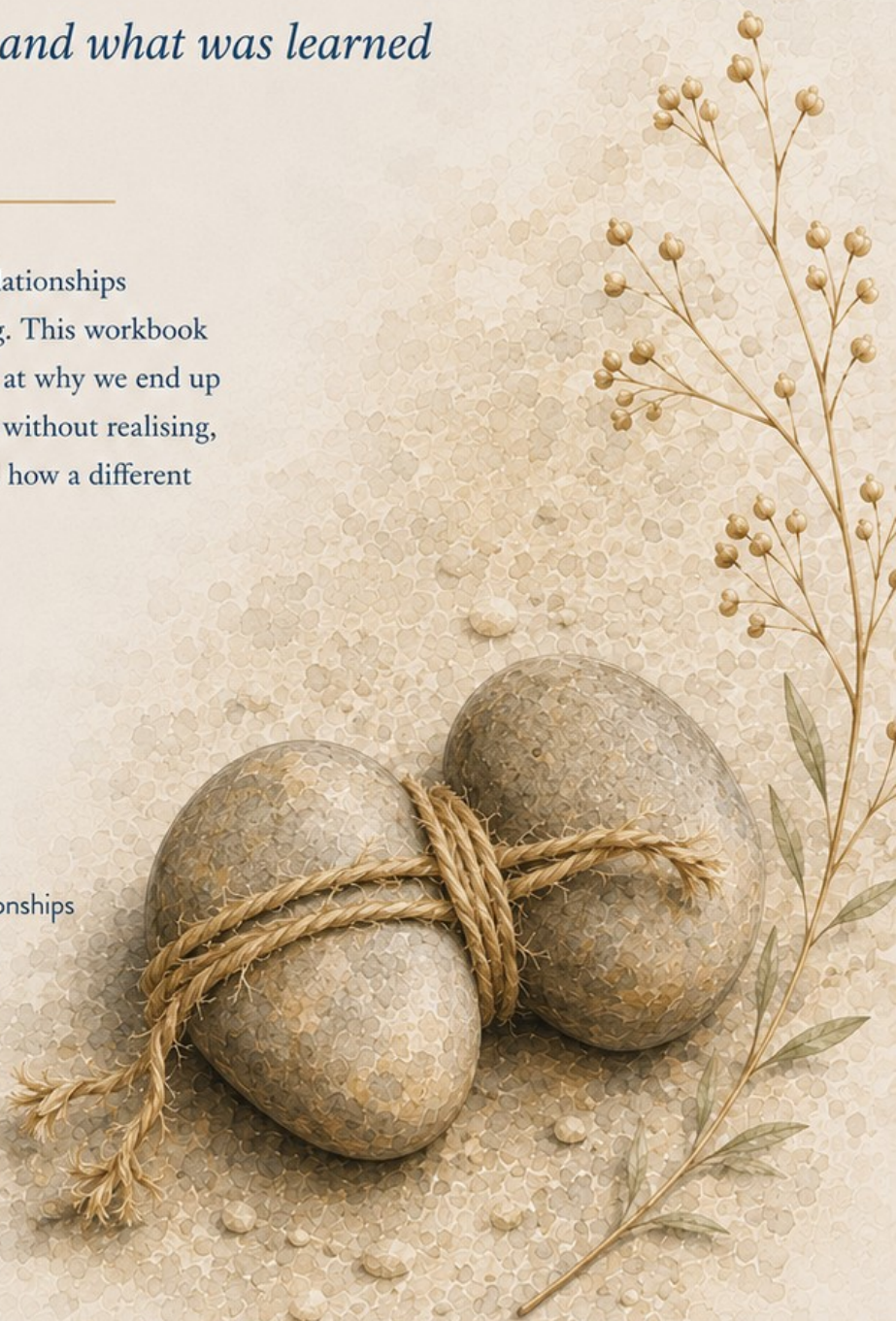
Of all the things that bring people to therapy, relationships are the most common — and the most confusing. This workbook offers a compassionate, clinically grounded look at why we end up in relationships that hurt, the patterns we repeat without realising, the difference between difficult and harmful, and how a different kind of love becomes possible.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  Why we end up in relationships that hurt
-  The relationship patterns we repeat
-  The difference between difficult and harmful
-  Why we stay — the psychology of painful relationships
-  What healthy love actually looks like
-  How to find the right level of support

*Healing rarely begins with blame.
It begins with understanding.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate relationships, anxiety, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.



www.shelagh-psychologist.com

ISBN 978-1-999999-00-0



9 781999 999000 >